

Recovering the Future With Frank Fisher – a Personal Appreciation

In 1986 I was invited to Australia to address a conference entitled *Futures in Education* organised by the then Commission for the Future (CFF). While there I noted some huge differences between it and the UK environment. I'd finished my PhD in 1982, been out of work for a year and, by chance, received a post-Doctoral fellowship from the then Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). But that was it. Once the fellowship was over, I was stranded. No one wanted a freshly minted futurist. Foresight projects had yet to be invented. Then came the call from Australia.

To cut a long story short I subsequently received a further invitation to another conference in Melbourne. This time it was for the centenary conference of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). I was a visiting fellow there for a while. I took part in the meeting and also ran a series of workshops. It was here that I met Frank Fisher who then headed up the Graduate School of Environmental Science (GSES) at Monash University. We immediately recognised that we had a great deal in common. As a result I was invited to deliver a series of lectures there at Monash in 1988.

By then I was living in Australia and had written a mere handful of published articles. These minor successes, and other related work, had encouraged me to feel that there was a chance I could 'make it' in this new environment. But things were not that simple – they seldom are. It took a good deal longer to land a lectureship in the Institute of Education at the University of Melbourne. These were difficult times both for myself and for my extended family. That's when true friends really count.

Frank was one of the few people who understood. Some time earlier he'd made the transition from a hard science and engineering background to one that regarded issues of 'social construction' as central. He was particularly interested in issues around energy, technology and social value. Indeed, for him cycling became an extended political act, a way of living his views and beliefs day-by-day and in a very concrete way.

As a long-term sufferer of Chron's disease (a degenerative condition of the digestive tract) Frank was in and out of hospital many times over the years. But this did not appear to slow him down or stop him from doing things he deemed necessary. Indeed, I remember him drawing critical attention to the oft-unthinking mantra of 'a healthy mind in a healthy body.' For him, the term was deeply ironic and, as with so many issues, he was able to respond to it with quiet – but determined – dignity.

It was characteristic of Frank that he took a genuine interest both in my work and what I was attempting to do personally. He invited me to assemble a selection of readings for the course I was to teach on *Alternative Australian Futures*. It built upon what had been achieved earlier by others (including Frank, Peter Cocks and Noel Gough) and presented, perhaps for the first time anywhere, a truly 'critical' approach to futures enquiry and action. Frank and I agreed that the term 'critical' did not imply criticism as such. Rather it meant 'looking, or understanding, in depth.' Some 20 students took the course and we shared the

view that something new and valuable had been achieved.

Without access to anything approaching a commercial budget the book was modest terms of production. Nevertheless, I was proud of my first Australian book.¹ The central proposition was that *'by recovering our individual sense of the future we may steadily recreate what has been for too long missing from our public life: a quality of participating consciousness in space and time.'* This and many related themes have since been worked out in greater depth - and hopefully greater clarity - in subsequent papers and books.

Frank and I continued to stay in touch over the following couple of decades, to meet when we could and occasionally to swap publications. In 2006 we met in Melbourne following an event we'd both attended. I gave him a copy of *Futures Beyond Dystopia* and was delighted to receive in return a signed copy of *Response Ability* – a superb compilation of some of his best short work.² Looking at these and other publications reminds me how central Frank Fisher has been to my life and work in Australia. He helped open the door and, once I was through it, provided a rare and valuable continuing sense of 'fellow feeling' - the kind of encouragement and support that helped to make all that followed possible.

He passed away on the 21st of August, 2012, and will be greatly missed by former students, colleagues, friends and, of course, his family.

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Notes

¹ Slaughter, R. *Recovering the Future*. Grad. School of Environ. Science, Monash University, Melbourne, 1988. Out of print. A revised version of the book is included on the CD-ROM *Towards a Wise Culture* (Foresight International, 2005).

² Slaughter, R. *Futures Beyond Dystopia: Creating Social Foresight*, Routledge, London, 2004 (also included on the *Towards a Wise Culture* CD-ROM, above). Fisher, F. *Response Ability*, Vista Publications, Elsternwick, VIC., 2006.